

*Luca de Meo*

# **R5, AN EXTRAORDINARY STORY**

*Three years at the heart of a project that changed Renault.*

*To the enthusiasts of the Automotive industry.*

**Thursday 2 July 2020, the day it all began. The story of the instant crush inspired by an orange mock-up. It's the story of the new R5.**

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It was early July so people were planning their holidays – hardly surprising after weeks of lockdown, social distancing and masks. I'd returned to work the previous day and I was delighted to be back in the office. Following my appointment as Chief Executive Officer of Renault in January of that year, I'd been waiting to get to work for a long time. I'm not one for sitting around and, in my case, Covid had nothing to do with it. The reason was a clause in my employment contract stipulating that I couldn't move from the Volkswagen group, where I was in charge of the Seat brand, to one of its competitors without taking a break. I had no choice but to accept it. The real work began when I stepped into the head offices at Billancourt. A top job that took me back to the company where I began my career in 1992 after graduating from Bocconi University in Milan. Renault was emerging from a crisis when I was appointed. I had a really positive connection with Jean-Dominique Senard, Chairman of the board and the man who brought me here. He was already starting to turn the company round, but it promised to be a tough challenge. The transition to electric power clashed with 140 years of combustion-related certainties.



During my endless ‘lockdown’, I kept myself busy as best I could. I read dozens of books and articles on the company and met a whole host of former managers and partners who willingly came to see me. I also did a great deal of thinking. That helped me form an idea of the key strengths and weaknesses of the company. But actually, I still know little or next to nothing. As I see it, the most important thing is the products. I couldn’t wait to see what Renault’s designers were working on. Particularly in terms of electric cars. I saw this as the basis for getting to the heart of things and building a recovery strategy. My first decision was to ask to see the new models.

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## A fluorescent orange mock-up

The day after I took up my new post, I set off for the Guyancourt Technocentre, south-west of Paris, around thirty minutes from the head offices in Billancourt. The Technocentre is the protected environment where the Renault brand designs, builds and tests its many innovations, and where it invents the models of tomorrow. A concentration of grey matter bringing together 12,000 engineers, designers and technicians. I asked for all the projects currently at the development stage to be grouped together in the same room. The line-up included a number of small cars for international markets and a large electric model. But I have to admit that I was a little disappointed. It was clear to me that a complete overhaul of the range would be necessary. Suddenly, as I was walking around, I saw a life-size model that looked surprisingly like an R5. It was fluorescent orange so I could hardly miss it. Curiosity aroused, I turned to my Technocentre contacts: “What’s this?” “Oh, it’s just an exploratory study by a designer, François Leboine, more of an exercise in style,” they replied. The head of design had cleverly placed it where he was sure I would see it. “It was a proposal for a small electric car,” they said, “but it was thrown out because the company didn’t want to get into retro design.” I took a long look at this object. For me, it was absolutely clear. I made the decision straight away. “That’s it exactly! Try to put this design on a platform with four wheels. It has to be an all-electric car. We’re going to build the Renault 5!”

Of course, in taking this decision, I was thinking of the successful relaunch of the Cinquecento, which I had the pleasure of overseeing at Fiat in 2007. A global success! But it was not my only source of inspiration, far from it. All the leading carmakers have at least one model that express their DNA more than any of the others. These are their classics. At Renault, they include 4L, R5, Twingo, Espace and Kangoo. Some, like the VW Golf or Mercedes S-Class, have evolved over the years without ever disappearing from the range, while others, like the 500 or Mini, make a comeback after a long time away.

**New Renault 5 is set to become the symbol of another bounceback, one that will take Renault into the select club of electric champions.**



And it works almost every time.

In its first life, Renault 5 made its mark on the brand's history. I'd hazard a guess that it has all the qualities necessary to do the same second time round. We can see clear parallels with the situation today. Back in the 1970s, Renault 5 helped the company to bounce back from the oil shock and make a successful transition to energy frugality. At the time, people were afraid that oil would disappear or, at least that it would become scarce and therefore very expensive. Some fifty years later, new Renault 5 is set to become the symbol of another bounceback, one that will take Renault into the select club of electric champions.

**Eye-poppingly modern,  
a symbol of the seventies,  
and an allegory of pop art.**

## **An affordable car with an edge**

My intuition told me to take a trip back in time, to the origins of a car that became an icon. To get to know it in order to effectively draw inspiration from it.

In 1972, when Renault 5 was launched, I was living in Africa. I was five years old, but I was already fascinated by anything on wheels, and I already wanted to make a career in this field. In my family, we only had Fiats. I remember my mum had a Fiat 127, the rival to R5. But we often mingled with French speakers and I noticed that the mothers of my French friends all drove a Renault 5. To be honest, I was a bit young to really understand current events. It was only some years later, in retrospect, that I learned about the creative ingenuity of this car. Just 3.52m long but packed with innovations and bold ideas. It was really impressive! Eye-poppingly modern, a symbol of the seventies, and an allegory of pop art. With its cheery face, bright colours, shiny orange leatherette seats, 3-door bodywork, plastic bumpers, original side protection and integrated door handles.

Straight away, the little Renault sparked a new concept: a car that was affordable but “edgy”, to use a word that had yet to make it into everyday language. Practical and playful, functional but satisfying for the driver. To me, it looked a bit like a small R16, the big family car launched in 1965 that broke new ground, well before the Golf, with a rear hatch that made it look like a cross between a saloon and estate. Like its predecessor, R5 also had this highly useful feature, making the boot bigger and easier to access. Owning one wasn’t an indication of your standard of living. But it did say a lot about your lifestyle. For the first time ever, the prestige of a vehicle was not directly correlated to its size. A paradigm shift!

Creating a mix like that was a pretty bold idea! And bold they were. First, the designer, Michel Boué, one of the ten stylists at the Renault studio. An unassuming man, he was described by the head of

**One of the virtues of the R5 was that it really galvanised the troops.**

the design office as somebody who had achieved little of note and whose ideas were routinely rejected. It wasn't the best of starts. But Boué was also a real enthusiast and a devotee of Raymond Loewy, the French-American pioneer of industrial design, who always said "ugliness doesn't sell". Loewy's obsession was to balance style with function, and his main clients included Shell, Coca Cola, Studebaker and Lucky Strike. On 26 April 1967, inspired by Loewy, Michel Boué submitted two sketches for the confidential 122 project. The key features were already there: The cubic lines, rear hatch, front grille forming a mischievous smile and big windows. The man behind this brilliant design coup described it as "a small object with agile lines, in harmony with a feminine aesthetic". It was daring but far-seeing. It was the time of the women's liberation movement. Women wanted to go out to work, so a second car was needed. Unusually, the mock-up unveiled that day was frozen almost immediately. It was clearly a case of right first time. To get the design right, Boué used another Renault innovation, the Renaultrama, which showed the mock-up in driving conditions on a scale of 1:5, with scenery scrolling behind it. Virtual reality 1970's style!

Another man willing to take risks was Pierre Dreyfus, the CEO. Straight away, he saw the new concept as 'fun and likeable' and said "let's do it". This sense of enthusiasm was shared by all those involved in bringing the project to life. One of the virtues of the R5 was that it really galvanised the troops.

**This confirmed my idea that cars can have charisma.**

## Ten years at the top

This confirmed my idea that cars can have charisma. As far as I know, it's something that's unique in the world of industry. That blend of charm and presence, that indefinable quality that makes the person (or object in this case) stand out from the crowd. Today, this subject is more topical than ever, since our sector is facing so many existential questions. We need to ask ourselves: how can we still create the stuff of dreams with a steering wheel and four tyres? How do you get the younger generation to fall in love with it? How do you balance a passion for cars with the new environmental constraints?

In this respect, the first R5 was a true source of inspiration. It broke all the rules while staying within budget. It would have been easy to play on its appeal with an unlimited budget. But this was not his case. So the little city car had to be clever. Its design was revolutionary but the mechanical set-up was conventional. The engine layout was longitudinal rather than transverse, with transverse torsion bars at the rear, a platform borrowed from the 4L, and flat side windows that were easier to machine.

Renault 5 was also innovative from an industrial standpoint. It was the first car to benefit from two technological breakthroughs that went on to revolutionise the automotive industry: the emergence of computer-aided design and the installation of the first industrial robots at the Flins pilot site. This kept development costs down, freeing up the investment budget for more glamorous aspects.

It was the right decision, since sales took off immediately. In 1973, sales topped the 100,000 mark, placing R5 in 5th place in the market rankings. The following year, it became the best-selling car in France. And it held on to the number one spot for almost ten years! Until a certain 205 poked its bonnet in. Overall, R5 sold 5.5 million units before taking its final bow in 1985, an event staged once again in style with a last advert, entitled "Goodbye cruel world".

**Eyes instead of headlights,  
a mouth instead of a number  
plate: an amazing example  
of anthropomorphic design.**



Amazing figures.

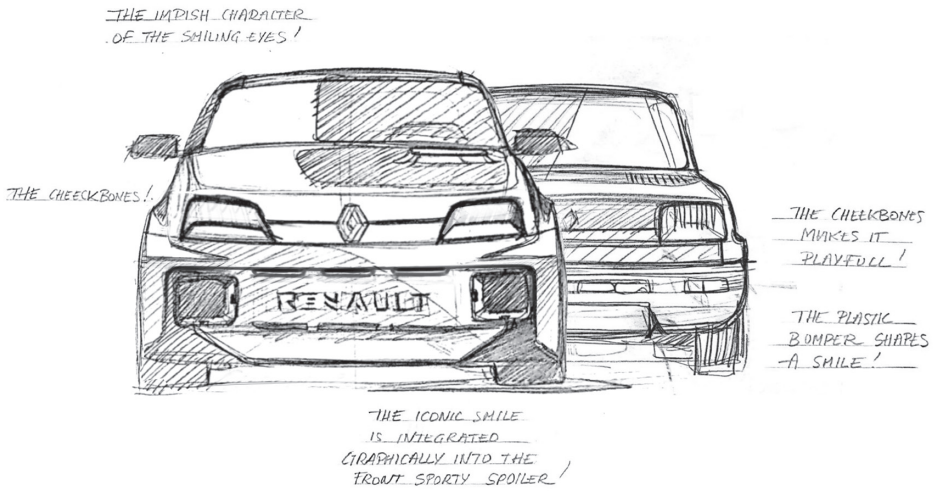
To achieve these fabulous results, the little Renault – and this is what I love about it too – had to fight like a lion. It challenged itself constantly, testing new versions and opening up new avenues. The TS with its built-in open-back seats, the supercharged Alpine, the muscular Turbo with its central engine and enormous wing extensions, the saloon with a longer wheelbase and conventional rear boot for the Spanish market, the TX with its premium finish, the five-door model, “Le Car”, for the US market. And even an electric version - already! - developed with EDF: lead batteries, with a top speed of 80 km/h and a range of 110 km.

It didn't always get things right, but no matter. Anybody can make mistakes, and R5 always got straight back out there with new ideas. This bold approach was reflected in the advertising, which relied on humour and a comic book style. A first in the automotive world at the time. Eyes instead of headlights, a mouth instead of a number plate: an amazing example of anthropomorphic design.

Yet Renault 5 didn't have an easy life. It was born a year before the 1973 oil crisis and grew up with the end of the post-war boom. Many European cars fell by the wayside as a result of what was virtually a shift in civilisation. But R5 stayed the course. It even enabled the company to ride the crisis. Responding to the situation, Renault launched a GTL version in 1976. Designed for fuel efficiency, it was the first car to drop below the symbolic threshold of 5 litres per 100 km.

I have to admit here that this exceptional market insight caused a certain amount of jealousy. In Italy, but elsewhere too. I know of several competitors who would have paid good money to slip into the inner sanctum of R5 and unlock all its secrets.

# I wanted new Renault 5 to be the founding pillar of our electric range.



## A natural lineage

Today, I can imagine R5 on high, looking down with tenderness and passion at its small electric sibling and saying, to quote one of the ads of the time: “Renault 5, that’s some family”! It was this natural lineage tipped the balance for my final decision. Let’s do it!

Before leaving Guyancourt on 2 July 2020, I asked the team to turn the orange mock-up into a real car as quickly as possible. It involved making a few tweaks, but it was clearly doable. Over the summer, I viewed the first sketches on a screen. By October, it had already been completed. Working under Laurens van den Acker and Gilles Le Borgne, the design and engineering teams set to work at the speed of light. Without forgetting the support provided by Gilles Vidal, who became VP Design for the Renault brand in November of that year. There was no question of slowing down. The stakes were so high that we had to drastically reduce the normal development time for a new model.

I wanted new Renault 5 to be the founding pillar of our electric range. When I presented the “Renaulution” project on 14 January 2021, the concept mock-up was already ready and on stage behind me. I chose it as a symbol of the Group’s new strategy. That was just six months after giving the engineers the green light on 2 July. As incredible as it may seem, this is the very car that is set to go into production in 2024!

I realised something when the Fiat 500 made its comeback: some products are magical. You don’t have to hold endless discussions, everybody is always in agreement on what needs to be done. And they do it. There’s no inertia. When a company revives a car that left such great memories, they pour a huge amount of love into it. This is always a promising sign for the future, since it is recognised by customers. They can see the love that went into the car. Day after day, I tracked the rebirth with great excitement.



I'm a real product freak, interested in every detail of a new model. It's part of who I am. I've walked around new R5 dozens of times during its development, keeping an almost obsessive watch over it, and organizing intense critical discussions leading to a number of changes, both minor and major. For example, customers will be able to choose the colour of the gear lever on the steering wheel. I took my inspiration for this from lipstick cases! One of my fixed ideas is to make sure that the design of a new car is identical to its initial concept. In my opinion, this is the only way to sell a dream that has become a reality. I made sure of this personally. That's what led us to keeping the small charge indicator on the bonnet.

One of the main highlights during these three years of development was when I got behind the wheel for the first time. On 3 July 2023, exactly three years after my first visit to the Technocentre, I was invited to drive the car at Aubevoye, one of our test tracks around a hundred kilometres from Paris. Nobody could recognise the car, concealed behind camouflage wrapping. I got behind the wheel, accompanied by one of the engineers in charge of the project. It was a moment of pure joy, with spectacular driving sensations and performance. I complimented my co-driver. His answer made me smile. "It's the boss's car ultimately, so we couldn't afford to make mistakes"! Well, what do you know... Is Renault turning back into the human-centric, friendly and accessible company it has always been, particularly in its heyday? I really hope so. It seemed to me that reviving an iconic vehicle would contribute to the process. We're certainly on the right track!

**It aims to popularize electric modernity.**



## Packed with software

Iconic, but in tune with the times. Although the lines are familiar, new Renault 5 actually has very little in common with its predecessor. We made some radical choices to give it a real personality. In an EV market revolutionised by Elon Musk's Tesla and shaken up by the latest innovations from Chinese manufacturers, there's no room for cars that are neither one thing nor another. You can't just stick batteries into conventional bodywork.

R5 rises to the challenge by targeting a segment that has so far been neglected by these new players: small, affordable city cars. Packed with innovations and software, it aims to popularize electric modernity. In this business, it all starts with the platform. The R5 platform was designed exclusively for electric drive systems. I had long discussions on this point with Renault engineers. Some of them defended the idea of a hybrid car that would also have a combustion engine. But ultimately, our design gives us a major advantage. We are the first in Europe to make this choice. This gives us a lead of at least two years over our competitors. Specifically, Renault 5 has just four battery modules – that's one-third of the usual number. The savings in terms of weight and space are considerable.

I also insisted on packing the car with interactive technology. The idea is for it to be a useful companion with real character.

Useful? It's the first car capable of feeding carbon-free energy back into the grid. This technical feature comes at a cost for the manufacturer, but it's great for consumers. Our surveys indicate that they will be able to save up to 50% on their electricity bills.

Character? The car will have its own avatar known as Reno, which will navigate between the dashboard and the driver's smartphone. A little character powered by artificial intelligence, able to give driving tips or provide advance information on the places the car drives

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through. Like a Tamagotchi, it will live and learn. This will make the car more human. It's also a touch of self-irony that's only possible for a leading brand. Following on from its predecessor, but armed with modern technology, new Renault 5 is still a bit of a pop culture car! It also has all the qualities of a far bigger model, since it will offer remote diagnostics and updates.

Competitive pricing positions it as a real game changer in the automotive industry. With a range of 300 km!

**This car is on a mission  
to reconnect Renault  
with France.**

## Made in France

So is that everything? Not quite. The product is certainly extremely important to me. But this is also an adventure with another side to it, one that is essential for France and for Renault. I'm talking here about industrial recovery and our efforts to prevent decline.

From an economic standpoint, it would be easier by far to build the new Renault 5 elsewhere, in low-cost countries. Many colleagues in-house encouraged me to do so. Once again, I listened to everyone's ideas, but I held out. And I made my decision.

This car is on a mission to reconnect Renault with France. To put behind us the ideas of deindustrialisation and relocation associated with the brand just three years ago. My thinking is based on an unwavering belief: when you buy a car, you buy a piece of that country's industrial culture. If we cut it off from its roots by building it elsewhere, it loses its soul. At the wheel of an Alfa Romeo, for example, you think of driving along Italian roads on holiday. At the wheel of a Renault 5, you need to imagine a French setting. I'm convinced that consumers are very sensitive to this aspect. Providing that it doesn't cost more, of course!

I would never say that it was easy, but we did it. We're going to breathe new life into the 'made in France' model without losing out financially. New Renault 5 will be assembled in Douai in the Hauts de France region. A strong nod to the original R5, which was the first vehicle to roll off the production lines at this plant. Nearby, we have deployed a vast ecosystem dedicated to electric cars, which we have called ElectriCity. Over €10 billion of direct and indirect investment has been injected in this region for this launch. We are setting up a major industrial complex, with two assembly plants and two gigafactories for batteries, one of which will be run by Verkor, a French start-up. The aim is to limit the carbon footprint of the entire system: 80% of suppliers are located within a 300-kilometre radius.

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This also cuts logistics costs and reduces environmental impact.

Over the past three years, we've been tracking unnecessary expenditure and looking at every possible way to lower our cost price. Endlessly. As a result, we have drastically reduced the number of parts used to build our cars. When I joined the company, we needed up to 2,600 for a small car. This figure has now dropped below 1,300 on average for new models, and even to less than 1,100 for Renault 5. The benefits here are many: the car can be assembled more quickly, and quality takes a huge leap forward. Above all, we have cut development times from four to three years, and I think we can make them even shorter. We have no choice. The automotive industry needs to become more agile to address the many technological transformations that are set to take place at an ever increasing pace. In the battery sector, for example, it's not impossible that some plants could become obsolete before they even open their doors.

We've already learned a lot during the development of this car. But it is just the first link in a long chain. We will be using the same platform to build Renault 4 (another Group icon) and an Alpine model. They will be followed by electric Twingo and many others. The Renault family is set to grow at a steady pace over the coming years. But I'll always have a special, emotional connection with Renault 5 E-Tech electric. My first child at Renault.

Luca de Meo, CEO, Renault Group